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ABSTRACT

Based on direct observation of farmworker housing, reviews of the literature on the subject, "openended" interviews with migrant workers or members of their families, and visits to some 75 camps in Texas, Florida, Delaware, Maryland, Michigan, and Colorado, this report examines the conditions of migrant housing. Part I provides a brief historical overview of the migrant experience, focusing on the uses of shelter as a bargaining chip in the agricultural labor markets, and examines the federal government's critical role in these proceedings, especially "its historic tendency to confuse the farmworkers' welfare with that of their employers." Concentrating on the housing conditions which existed in the summer of 1980, Part II presents the migrant families' own assessments of their housing, the amount of space provided for families, the rooms they crowd into, the mattresses they sleep on, the burners they cook on, the bath-houses they shower in, the out-houses they use, and the dusty, treeless yards their children play in. The relationship between these and the migrants' notably poor health and low morale is discussed. The last section briefly examines the politics of farmworker housing as characteristically practiced in rural communities. A 30-item bibliography on migrant farmworkers concludes the report. (Author/NQA)

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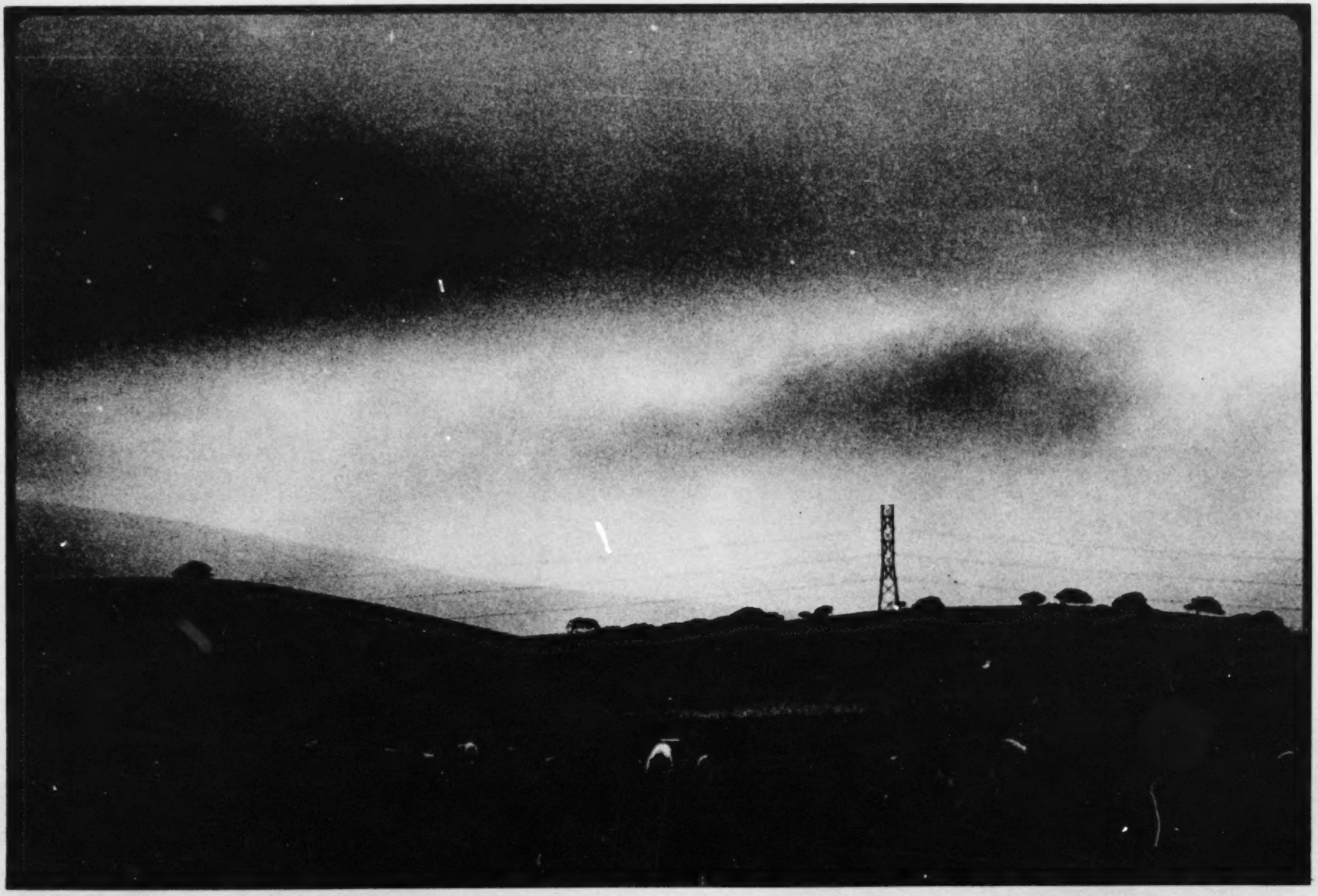

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Preface

Periodically, the plight of farmworkers—especially migrant farmworkers—is brought to public attention with special force. Edward R. Murrow's "Harvest of Shame," broadcast more than 20 years ago, is the prime example. Martin Carr's update of "Harvest of Shame," which aired more than ten years later, and Chris Wallace's update, shown last year, also described with sobering accuracy the conditions of migrant life. Many newspapers, magazines and local television stations have also reported on the problems facing farmworkers from time to time.

Although it could be argued that even the best of these reports succeeded mostly in creating no more than quiet guilt among thoughtful observers, some relationship, however slight, does seem to exist between the quality of publicity that focuses on a problem and movement toward the resolution of that problem. Publicity alone will not resolve a problem, but it can help create a brutal awareness of the problem. That awareness, in turn, can help create a political atmosphere in which positive steps can be taken.

This report represents another effort to raise the national consciousness and to awaken the conscience regarding farmworker housing. Its roots lie in the cooperative work of a number of national organizations that came together four years ago to form the "Farmworker Housing Coalition."

The Coalition's participants included the Housing Assistance Council, the Migrant Legal Action Program, the National Association of Farmworker Organizations, the National Council of La Raza, the National Hispanic Housing Coalition, the National Housing Law Project, the National Low Income Housing Coalition, the National Rural Housing Coalition, and Rural America.

The Coalition convened a two day conference of farmworker housing groups and individual farmworkers in the autumn of 1977 to discuss farmworker housing problems and to propose solutions. As one of its recommendations that conference proposed a legislative agenda that included changes in existing law to achieve quick improvements and bolder, more comprehensive initiatives that might lead towards a comprehensive solution to the problem of guaranteeing decent housing for this special class of working people.

To no one's surprise, the Congress was willing to entertain discussion of tinkering with the existing system, but paid little attention to suggestions about the need for bold new initiatives.

The Coalition proposed congressional hearings because it believed that if Congress' own investigations brought attention to the farmworker problem, Congress would have to do something about it. The call for hearings was ignored. The plight of farmworkers had become so remote in the minds of most of the members of Congress that other, more "pressing" issues always seemed to have priority.

If elected representatives would not conduct hearings on the issue, the Coalition decided they would have to take the initative itself. The members of the Coalition knew that their hearings would not have the stature or impact of congressional hearings, but they hoped that they would draw some local attention to the problems, develop some new insights and prepare a record of the misery endured by many farmworkers.

The Farmworker Housing Coalition held a series of public hearings that began in the autumn of 1979 and continued through the winter of 1979-80. Each hearing lasted a day. Hearings were held in Boise, Idaho, Lansing, Mich., Homestead, Fla., San Juan, Texas, and Sacramento, Calif.

At each hearing a member of the Coalition presided over a panel that took testimony from local people intimately involved with farmworker housing problems, including providers, advocates, farmers and farmworkers. The hearing panels included, variously, state legislators, representatives from state administrative offices or the governor's office, city officials, representatives of farmworker advocacy groups and representatives from the Farmers Home Administration.

The hearings documented the degradation suffered by farmworkers directly and by society indirectly. They pointed out the problems of dependence created when the employer is also the sole provider of housing for his workers. They highlighted the difficulty of working with federal and state agencies with limited amounts of funds and an abundance of bureaucratic red tape.

Out of the hearings one could perceive the broad framework of a solution—a framework that would have to include the infusion of funds from the federal and state governments, the requirement that farmworkers have control over their own housing, the need for cooperation among all the parties involved, and the necessity for independent technical assistance at the local level.

In order to build on this substantial record of testimony and to put it into a broader historical context, the Coalition obtained a grant from the Community Services Administration to allow Richard J. Margolis, a writer known for his commentary and reportage on social problems, especially those that affect low income people in rural areas, to prepare the document that follows.

In addition to a careful review of the transcripts from the five hearings, Margolis carried out his

own field investigation, looking first-hand at the housing and interviewing the people. What he found through his site visits, interviews and research speaks for itself. His eloquence in presenting it is just what the situation demands. We trust that you will be convinced of the need—and the responsibility—facing the nation to act on the problem of farmworker housing when you finish.

—Farmworker Housing Coalition

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Lee Reno, of the National Housing Law Project, helped steer me through the initial stages of data gathering. In addition, he and Hal Wilson, director of the Housing Assistance Council, acted informally as my "project officers," a role that required considerable patience, since the project took much longer than any of us had anticipated.

Two gifted historians at the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Wayne Rasmussen and Tom Fulton, did their best to enlighten me about 150 years of migrant farmworker history; and I was further educated in that area by two old friends from Rural America, Phil Brown and George Rucker.

Many people along the way made my travels easier and my visits more pertinent. I am especially grateful to the following friends and colleagues on whose kindness I depended: in Delaware, Jeanine Kleimo; in Florida, Carol Sills and Rudy Juarez; in Michigan, Lana Stein; in Colorado, John Maldonado, Theresa Daus, Rebecca Gold and Leroy Lopez; and in Texas, Roberto Garcia and the remarkable Galans—Hila, Anna, Chavela and Waldo.

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Finally, my thanks to the Farmworker Housing Coalition and to the Community Services Administration for making this report possible. All credit goes to them, but all responsibility for errors found herein remains with me.

RJM
Cambridge, Massachusetts
March 27, 1981

dedicated to Clay Cochran

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Introduction

This report attempts to bring us closer to an understanding of our national obligations to farmworkers and their families, perhaps five-million persons in all, whose seasonal energies regularly stock the American larder to overflowing. Theirs is a story that has been told before, sometimes eloquently. But like all human struggles that occur beyond our daily purview, even beyond our imaginations, it bears retelling.

Indeed, the uneven volume of national discussion about farmworker conditions, which has ranged over the years from brisk to inaudible, affords us an accurate gauge of our seesaw social conscience; for if debate has often been useful, silence has always been unconscionable.

Here I shall focus on *migrant* farmworkers, the more than one-million women, men and children who travel from place to place, yet have no place to call their own. Their continuous, frenetic search for shelter—meaning not only decent housing but also a measure of protection and respect within the communities they serve—is a major concern of the report.

Although this is not a demographic study, it may be useful to recall that farmworkers are "typically American" in that they can be found in every state of the Union and can be said to reflect nearly every hue and background known to man.

Strangely, no Federal agency has ever taken the trouble to essay a precise census of migrant farmworkers, so estimates of their numbers and characteristics vary widely and are probably unreliable. Perhaps the best available are to be found in a 1977 U.S. Department of Agriculture report, which claims that half the migrant work force is white, while about one-third is brown or Hispanic in origin; the remainder is made up of blacks, Orientals and Native Americans. (See "The Hired Farm Working Force of 1977," by Gene Rowe, Agricultural Economic Report No. 437.)

But by leaving out the families who accompany the workers, those figures doubtless underestimate the minority component. My own experience in the field, admittedly impressionistic, suggests that Chicanos make up a much larger proportion of the migrant population than the studies reveal.

What we know for certain is that migrant farmworker families derive from a remarkably broad spectrum of tribes and nations, including some as near to our borders as Mexico or Haiti and others as distant as Brazil or China. If pluralism is still a cherished value in America, then we are very lucky in our migrants.

On the other hand, the migrants have not been nearly so lucky in us, the beneficiaries of their labors. Among all categories of American workers surely migrants have borne the heaviest burden for the lightest recompense. According to federal government figures, their average family income is less than $3,000 a year. They toil in an occupation considered the third most hazardous in the nation. They endure infant and maternal mortality rates two-and-a-half times higher than our overall national rates. Their average life expectancy is 49 years. The little formal schooling they manage to scavenge is heartbreakingly perfunctory, seldom exceeding six years. And much of their housing, as we shall see, consigns them to an environment that is squalid beyond compare.

Withal, the work continues; the families cohere and persevere; the center holds.

"Locked in such a cycle of poverty and despair," the President's Commission on Mental Health has noted, "it is a tribute to their strength and fortitude that they survive at all." I agree, and despite the gloom that comes with the territory, I hope this publication will be read as a testament to the farmworkers' courage and inventiveness.

Throughout we shall be confronting a question often posed by observers when confronted with widespread social misery: *Why is it this way?*

Part I, "The Migrant Experience," confronts the past that created the present migrant ordeal. In it we shall pay particular attention to the uses of shelter as a bargaining chip in the agricultural labor markets, observing how in this uneven match the grower has nearly always held the higher cards. The upshot has been an ascendant grower class in 24-hour control of a chronically isolated and politically weak migrant work-force.

We shall also examine the Federal government's critical role in these proceedings, especially its historic tendency to confuse the farmworkers' welfare with that of their employers.

Part II, "Homes of the Brave," concentrates on the way it is, or was in the summer of 1980, when I visited migrant camps. The housing I saw there ranged from excellent to execrable. Much of it, by accepted civilized standards, was simply uninhabitable.

We shall visit some of the camps, listening to the families' own assessments of their housing and judging for ourselves the conditions that circumscribe their days and nights: the rooms they crowd into, the mattresses they sleep on, the burners they cook on, the bathhouses they take showers in, the out-houses they grope towards in the dark of night, the dusty, treeless yards their children shun all day. And we shall discover connections between these and attendant migrant woes, notably poor health and low morale.

A final, brief section, "Epilogue," examines the politics of farm-

worker housing as characteristically practiced in rural communities. The examples presented —each a mini-drama in prejudice or indifference—are intended to underscore the distance we as a nation must travel before farmworker families are at last humanely housed. To rely primarily on local good will, as we have long been doing, is to postpone real solutions.

Before turning to the substance of the report, a disclaimer may be in order, along with an explanation of how I gathered the material.

For better or for worse, this is not one of those massive studies of the sort commissions and consortia produce with such astonishing regularity. No sample was drawn; no questionnaire, or "instrument," was designed: no team of interviewers was hired and dispatched to far corners of the land; no computers were ever switched on. Hence what we have here is reportage and analysis, a distillation of one writer's discoveries and judgments.

Essentially, the approach reflects the tradition of writers like Jacob A. Riis, that indefatigable turn-of-the-century journalist who kept telling Gilded-Age Americans what many did not want to hear, namely, "How the Other Half Lives."

In a preface to his classic work on the slums of New York City, Riis justifies his one-person, reportorial approach on the grounds that "every man's experience ought to be worth something to the community from which he drew it . . . so long as it was gleaned along the line of some decent honest work . . . ."

Some of Riis's contemporaries, among them owners of tenement houses, complained that his observations were biased, incomplete and unscientific. Yet his findings were amply confirmed in the elaborate statistical studies that followed—studies produced by commissions and universities in response to Riis's simple reportage.

The work from which I gleaned this report combined direct observation of farmworker housing, and a good deal of reading on the subject, with more than 200 separate interviews, all of them "open-ended" and most of them with migrant workers or members of their families.

I visited some 75 camps in six states—the "home-base" states of Texas and Florida, and the "stream" states of Delaware, Maryland, Michigan, and Colorado.

Although many of the camps had fences and "No Trespassing" signs, and some bristled with barbed wire, I encountered only occasional trouble. Three landlords or their representatives politely asked me to leave. The first two times I assented; the third time I demurred, and to my surprise was allowed to continue the interviews.

Wherever I went people told me terrifying tales about "interlopers" in the camps who were either beaten or banished at gunpoint by angry farmers. I saw none of that first-hand.

On several occasions I was able briefly to share in one or another family's domestic routine, eating at their table or sleeping in their quarters. Twice I worked in the fields alongside my interviewees. My hosts were invariably generous with what little they had and uncomplaining about all they lacked. Protest did not seem high on their agenda.

Besides the farmworker families, I interviewed many other participants in the migrant drama: growers, landlords and community leaders; specialists in rural health and rural housing; attorneys, social workers and assorted farmworker advocates; and government officials at many levels, from county commissioners to heads of Federal agencies.

In my readings I relied chiefly on testimony given at five public hearings held during 1979-80 and sponsored by the Farmworker Housing Coalition. The hearings, each intended to cover a different region of the country, took place in California, Florida, Idaho, Michigan and Texas.

Although much of the testimony at those sessions focused on local conditions and frustrations, there emerged a national pattern of neglect that my own subsequent findings fully support.

In addition to the transcripts, I delved as deeply as time permitted into the literature of migrant farmworkers, both past and present. It turned out to be a surprisingly rich repository. Apparently we have been more eager to study the farmworker's lot than to improve it. A selected bibliography, listing the works I consider most useful, can be found in the back.

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The Migrant Experience: A History

"Migrants are children of misfortune . . . . We depend on misfortune to build up our force of migratory workers, and when the supply is low because there is not enough misfortune at home, we rely upon misfortune abroad to replenish the supply . . . ."
The President's Commission on Migratory Labor in American Agriculture, 1951

The story of migrant farmworkers in America, a 150-year saga to date, is really the story of agricultural growth as seen from the bottom up. The crucial changes that technology and avarice have wrought on agrarian life—the westward drift towards ever-larger holdings, the specialization of produce and "rationalization" of production, the increasingly corporate structure of the agricultural enterprise—all these and more have had their corollary effects on migrant farmworker conditions, invariably for the worse.

In general, and with all due respect to farm owners, it can be said that the grower's relationship to his worker has frequently resembled that of a parasite to its host: every "advance" in modern agriculture, from the invention of the reaper to the importation of *braceros,* has been achieved at the workers' expense.

The whole picture seems to present a gloss of inevitability that would hold no man responsible and, consequently, no solution workable. The migrants in this portrait are painted as simply the unfortunate victims of "Progress."

Yet through the decades what has largely determined the migrant's fate has not been Progress but rather a series of profitable decisions made by growers and usually supported by government. These choices have served to keep migrant workers in a state approaching peonage, delivering up to corporate agriculture a work force so "ideal" as to surpass Scrooge's most exploitative dreams —a pool of skilled laborers at once docile and diligent, and forever available.

In this ongoing drama, the farmworkers' unfulfilled need for adequate housing looms as both a sign and a contributing cause of their peonage. For if a man's home is his castle, what are we to say of the myriad migrant camps, the fenced-in company housing, where the farmworker families reside entirely on the suffrance of growers and crew chiefs, and from whence they can be expelled without notice?

But I am getting ahead of my story.

****

Almost from the beginning American agriculture has depended for production and profit upon the hands of a landless, nomadic proletariat. Neither the legendary self-reliance of the 19th century farmer nor the prodigious, petro-powered miracle of 20th century mechanization has ever been sufficient to the harvest-time challenge. Wherever crops have ripened, workers have been summoned.

As long ago as the 1830's, according to the historian David E. Schob, the summer harvesting cycle "set in motion a vast army of men from diverse backgrounds: skilled and unskilled, immigrant and free black, as well as thousands of common farm laborers.... Men followed the ripening tide of grain." (*Hired Hands and Plowboys: Farm Labor in the Midwest, 1815-60,* University of Illinois, 1975.)

Then as now, moreover, farmers fretted over their annual obligation to provide shelter for that vast army, but with a major difference: their common concern for the workers' welfare ran relatively strong. In part, this was because the line between classes in those formative years was still blurred and tenuous. In part, too, a chronic shortage of workers made housing a useful lure in the farmer's annual hunt for helping hands.

An editorial published in 1841 by the *New Genesee* (Illinois) *Farmer* was typical of the times in preaching a certain solicitude towards farmworkers: "Both duty and interest require you to regard their rights," the journal admonished farmers. "They may demand, at reasonable prices, as much palatable and wholesome food as is needed to preserve unimpaired their health and strength. They may demand as many hours for rest and sleep as the human constitution ordinarily requires. They may demand comfortable beds, in rooms not unhealthy .... They may claim kindness and civility in all your language towards them, and in all your treatment of them."

Although much of the farmworker housing back then was primitive, some did provide "comfortable beds, in rooms not unhealthy .... "

The worst was to be found in the Far West, where community sanctions were weak and where many of the workers were "alone and afraid, in a world they never made."

A description of Chinese wheat harvesters in California in 1868, for instance, mentioned "poor John," a farmworker who "spreads a dirty tent in some corner of the field near water, sleeps on the ground, works by starlight, and lives on rice of his own cooking." (See Paul S. Taylor's "Perspectives on Housing Migratory Agricultural Laborers," *Land Economics,* August 1951.)

But in the East and the Midwest, ethical tradition and the labor market were such that *some* hous-

ing had to be offered. Itinerant laborers might be bedded down in the farmhouse loft, with only a blanket separating them from the farmer's children. If the farmer had a daughter coming of age, he might feel called upon to build separate cottages for his hired hands. Failing that, he would put them in a barn or a grainary, and give them cots.

Farm labor in those times of manual threshing and bundling was probably as grim and arduous as it is today, but the farmworker's status was more respectable—just a shade lower, in fact, than that of the farmer, a man with only a few acres and a lot of debts.

The farmer and the worker toiled side by side in the field, and it was taken for granted that some day, with proper thrift and diligence, the worker could become a farmer too. Climbing the class-ladder seemed relatively easy, less an American Dream than an everyday experience.

Abraham Lincoln, himself a farmworker in his youth, described as well as anyone the golden circular staircase Americans thought they were climbing: "Many independent men everywhere in these states, a few years back in their lives, were hired laborers. The prudent, penniless beginner in the world labors for wages awhile, saves a surplus with which to buy tools or land for himself, then labors on his own account another while, and at length hires another new beginner to help him."

Yet even in Lincoln's time the American idyll of unending opportunity was vanishing, effaced in part by the gloom of urban sweatshops, but also by "sweatshops in the sun." For American agriculture had already begun to "rely upon misfortune abroad" in its search for cheap seasonal labor, drawing first on the Irish in flight from the Great Potato Famine, then on Germans and Scandinavians and, a generation or so later, on Italians, Poles and Russians.

The addition of these untutored immigrants to the labor pool made the farmer's life much easier, holding down wages and minimizing pressures on him to provide clean cots in comfortable quarters.

It also gave rise to a "backlash" political faction, the American Party or "Know-Nothings," whose nativist creed encouraged Americans to substitute chauvinism for brotherhood. As one contemporary critic put it, the Know-Nothings judged people "by the accidents of their condition, instead of striving to find a common lot for all, with a common access to the blessings of life."

Although never a dominant force in American politics, certain Know-Nothing ideas found a home in agriculture, where they reside to this day.

It was during that period (the 1850s) that many of the now-familiar farmworker myths developed: Farm labor was too demeaning a trade for "real" Americans. The best farmworkers were foreigners, because they demanded so little. Farmworkers tended to be unintelligent, dirty and without ambition.

A commentator of that era probably spoke for many when he complained that "the inferior but necessary labor of a farm must be performed now, in the majority of cases, by the most inefficient Americans, or by the rawest and most uncouth of Irish and Germans."

Thus many of the ideas and forces that would determine modern farmworker conditions were already in place a century ago. These included a tendency among farmers to muster help from the lowest, most impoverished ranks of workers; a hiring preference for aliens and the foreign-born; a conviction that such workers were fundamentally inferior to everyone else, and therefore less in need of "a common access to the blessings of life"; and a consequent inclination to isolate workers from the community-at-large, making of them a pariah proletariat, deprived of civil protection and vulnerable to exploitation.

As agriculture approached the 20th century—as it ramified, consolidated and became an instrument of corporate ambitions—these tendencies would harden into a set scenario, to be repeated again and again in such disparate locales as Florida, Texas, Michigan, California—wherever ripening tides flourished and migrant workers toiled.

In examining the forging of this scenario, we look first to California, that particular Eden where it all began.

It was doubtless in California that someone first bit the apple of corporate agriculture, thereby ensuring that what might have been a paradise for small farmers would become an agri-industrial hell for migrant workers.

The likely victim of that seminal sin was probably a conquered Mexican landowner in legitimate possession of an old Spanish land grant. Thousands of such grants were transferred through theft or chicanery to the new American settlers following the Mexican-American War, with the result that California's agriculture soon took on corporate characteristics: large, monopolistic holdings; absentee control; aggressive mechanization; and specialization of crops (shifting from wheat to fruits, vegetables and cotton, for instance).

Those "innovations" were then widely imitated in other sections of the country, eventually transforming much of American agriculture from small farms to "factories in the field"—from Jefferson to DiGiorgio.

With the changes in structure came parallel changes in labor

practices, which now followed the logic of industrialism rather than the dictates of humanism. Henceforth, only the boldest of editorialists would dare advise growers that their migrant workers "may claim kindness and civility in all your language towards them, and in all your treatment of them."

In California, at least, civility was not high on the growers' agenda. What they wanted was a work force so desperate for sustenance it would accept the least in proffered wages and housing. As Paul Taylor has observed, "The lower the customary standard of living of the migrant—i.e., the less demanding they are—the poorer the housing usually provided them. This is one reason why agricultural employers have welcomed a long succession of low-standard immigrant nationalities . . . ."

As it happened, the first in California's long succession of "low-standard" farmworkers were not immigrants—they were Digger Indians, a band described by one observer as "perhaps the lowest tribe of the human race."

The unfortunate Diggers were soon succeeded, however, by the Chinese, who by 1886 were said to contribute seven-eighths of the state's agricultural labor force. They had been "literally driven into the agricultural districts" by Know-Nothing sentiment, which had banned them from work in the mines and on the railroads and had hounded many of them out of the slums of San Francisco.

In his brilliant history of California's migrant farmworkers, *Factories in the Fields* (1935), Carey McWilliams explains what all this meant to growers: "From the growers' point of view, the situation was not only desirable, it was well-nigh perfect. The Chinese, being a despised minority fighting for the mere right to exist in a hostile territory, could be employed at sub-subsistence wages. In other respects, moreover, they were ideal farm laborers. They had no families and, consequently, were satisfied with 'the cheapest, meanest quarters.' They boarded themselves in some mysterious manner . . . . Lastly, they were extremely efficient workers . . . ."

In time, however, white Californians—by blending persistent racist propaganda with sporadic mob violence—succeeded in expelling Chinese workers from the orchards, making it necessary for growers to look elsewhere for a "well-nigh perfect" labor force.

There followed a veritable Babel of importations from Japan, the Philippines, Hawaii, Hindustan, Armenia—each group a "despised minority" in its time, each providing indispensable labor in the orchards, sugar beet fields and vegetable farms of California.

The alien tide had the desired effect of discouraging white workers from competing for jobs. As one of the growers declared, "In many instances the housing provided for farm help . . . would be scorned by an up-to-date hog raiser as unfit for his hogs. How could any but the most debased of American humanity be induced to regard their labor under such conditions as white man's work?" (As we shall note later, some migrant housing is still indistinguishable from pig pens.)

That observer, of course, was committing the old Know-Nothing fallacy of judging people "by the accidents of their conditions." In reality, the degree of debasement depended not on the workers but on their employers and the circumstances they imposed.

On rare occasions the anger that simmered in each worker's heart would boil over, as it did in the Wheatland Riot of 1913, when several workers and county officials were killed and many were injured.

As Carey McWilliams observed, the riot was a spontaneous migrant protest against the camp's unspeakable living conditions: "There were nine outdoor toilets for 2800 people. The stench around the camp was nauseating, with children and women vomiting; dysentery was prevalent to an alarming degree . . . . There was no organization for sanitation, no garbage disposal. Local Wheatland stores were forbidden to send delivery wagons to the camp so that the workers were forced to buy what supplies they could afford from a 'concession' store on the ranch."

A commission of inquiry set up after that event concluded that inadequate housing and sanitation were the primary cause of the riot, and that "the improvement of living conditions in the labor camps will have the immediate effect of making the recurrence of impassioned, violent strikes and riots not only improbable, but impossible, and, furthermore, such improvements will go far toward eradicating the hatred and bitterness in the minds of the employers and the roving, migratory laborers."

But the hatred did not subside. If anything, it deepened, as new despised minorities arrived to augment the migrant reservoir. The most numerous among the newcomers were Mexican, who had begun trickling across the border as early as 1900.

By 1920 Mexican immigrants were flooding into Texas, Arizona and California, some of them, even then, finding work as far east as the Carolinas and as far north as Wisconsin and Illinois. In the ensuing decade 460,000 Mexicans were legally admitted to this country, to say nothing of the thousands who entered without permission.

This was the beginning of the Hispanic Diaspora, which would turn out to be the largest single ethnic migration in U.S. history. From this point on, the saga of

farm labor in American would be increasingly written in Brown ink. (See John Chala Elas, *The Employment of Mexican Workers in U.S. Agriculture, 1900-1960*, University of California, Los Angeles, 1961.)

As usual, the new arrivals were both welcomed and rejected by the "host" farm communities—welcomed as a fresh supply of cheap, docile labor, but rejected as equals entitled to the common considerations of civil life.

The double standard was eloquently summarized by a California politician named S. Parker Frisselle, who in 1926 got himself elected to Congress on the strength of promises that he would work for large-scale immigration of Mexicans under federal supervision. Frisselle told voters his mission was "to get us Mexicans and keep them out of our schools and out of our social problems."

It was a popular and already familiar attitude: by manipulating immigration rules the Feds should ensure a steady surplus of farm labor, but they need not fret about the social consequences, which might well include the workers' lack of housing. Migrants were not allowed to have social problems.

It would probably have astonished Frisselle and his loyal electorate to learn that the time was soon coming when Washington would make an unprecedented commitment to the welfare of migrant farmworkers, and in particular to the provision of adequate shelter. In an otherwise embarrassing national history of migrant neglect, this was to be our most civilized moment.

The government of the United States came late to the defense of farm labor. A brief, quasi-official nod in that direction could be discerned in 1911, when the President's Country Life Commission, as part of its major report on the decline of rural America, devoted a few pages to farmworker conditions, including housing.

"There is widespread conviction," said the Commission, "that the farmer must give greater attention to providing good quarters to laborers and to protect them from discouragement and from the saloon."

Elsewhere the Commission declared that "The employer bears a distinct responsibility to the laborer, and also to society, to house him well and to help him contribute his part to the community welfare."

In the 1920s several agencies within the Departments of Agriculture and Labor undertook more thorough studies of migratory miseries, but their declarations were remarkably unringing and the response in Congress was desultory.

It wasn't until the mid-1930s that the nation, catalyzed by a chemistry of Depression despair and New Deal hope, finally got around to demonstrating an active interest in the welfare of migrant workers. The housing programs that were then enacted—the offer of low-interest loans to farmworkers and the construction of federally-owned migrant camps—were too small and scattered to solve the problem, but they pointed for the first time in the right direction.

What the New Deal programs accomplished was to transfer control of some migrant housing from growers to workers, or at least to the workers' temporary ally, the U.S. government. Anyone who doubted the significance of such power transfers and the threat they posed to corporate agriculture needed only to observe the opposition they inspired among growers. It was loud, persistent and ultimately successful.

The noble experiment began, naturally enough, in the Central Valley of California, where two camps for migrants were established in 1935 by the Federal Emergency Relief Administration. Their purpose was to make a start at housing the "Okies" and "Arkies" who had been pouring into the state, having been driven off their own farms by dust, drought and Depression.

Between 1935 and 1938 more than 250,000 Dust-Bowl refugees came to California in search of agricultural work. Here was a new sort of migrant worker—a white, native-born "squatter" who had seen better days and who understood the rudiments of American politics. Moreover, his Ford "flivver" was packed with women and children literally crying for shelter. They had to be reckoned with. (For more on the New Deal and the "Okies," see Sidney Baldwin's history of the Farm Security Administration, *Poverty and Politics*, University of North Carolina, 1968.)

By 1937 the newly created Farm Security Administration (FSA) in Washington was using emergency funds to build camps in a half-dozen states. Congress endorsed the idea two years later and appropriated a considerable sum for construction and operation of the camps.

There were essentially two types: permanent camps and mobile temporary camps. The latter consisted of tents for the workers, along with central wash and shower facilities, and trailers for offices and makeshift clinics.

The permanent camps were more elaborate. They featured individual cabins grouped around central utility units that provided showers, flush toilets and common laundry facilities. As Paul Taylor tells it, "In the most carefully planned and most fully-equipped camps were structures providing public school, clinic, hospital and nursery facilities, cooperative store, community center, canning center and housing for a resident manager and staff . . . . The planning of the camps and apart-

ment-type housing achieved international architectural recognition."

Some nearer-to-home recognition was less cheering. Growers' associations in California kept registering strong objections to the camps—not because they were a form of public assistance, notes Taylor, but because the housing "was under public control and not under employer control."

The existence of federal camps as alternatives to company housing dramatized the larger struggle, the one between worker autonomy and peonage. The U.S. Senate Civil Liberties Committees, after investigating farm labor conditions in California, for instance, concluded that, "All workers in an employer's camp are more or less isolated, and as the employer can decide who is to live in his camp, a large measure of control can be exercised over the activities of laborers thus situated."

In the ensuing debate over the FSA housing programs, growers seldom troubled to disguise their true motives. For example, a representative of the agri-community in Kern County, California told a state legislative commission that, "Families residing on property of the operators and subject to the selection of an experienced foreman are usually dependable and loyal. They will behave themselves, take the thin with the thick, the poor picking with the good, with minimum complaint...." On the other hand, "Occupants of government controlled camps owe no allegiance to any growers." (Quoted by Ernesto Galarza in *Farm Workers and Agri-Business in California, 1947-1960*, University of Notre Dame, 1977.)

As if growers weren't having enough trouble with workers no longer eager to "take the thin with the thick," the FSA, by establishing democratically elected camp councils, was now encouraging migrants to manage their own affairs.

The councils, reports Ernesto Galarza, "were intended to give the residents a voice in management and operation .... They voted on rules concerning sanitation, recreation, education, safety, and other matters of self-government." As Galarza reminds us, "Carey McWilliams had seen these councils as significant agents for social organization among a rootless people, 'foreshadowing a new social order.'"

But the coming of a new social order was indefinitely delayed by the onset of World War II. Overnight the chronic farm labor surplus turned into a critical farm labor shortage, and the U.S. Department of Agriculture became a vast manpower center, recruiting farmworkers from places as distant as The Barbados and Newfoundland.

More camps were established to accommodate 150,000 new harvesters, but the FSA no longer managed the housing. The agency had been replaced by a new component within the USDA's War Food Administration, the Office of Labor.

Even the official language was altered by the demands of mobilization: the old "migratory labor camps" were now called "farm labor supply centers." (See Wayne D. Rasmussen, "A History of the Emergency Farm Labor Supply Program," USDA Monograph #13, 1951.)

By war's end (1945) the government was operating 191 "labor supply centers" in 26 states, with most in California, Florida and Texas.

Two years later, the number of centers had fallen to 118, with fewer than 70,000 migrants in residence. The emergency was over, and so was the party. In fact, the Farm Security Administration was already dead, a victim of pressures from commercial farmers on Congress to "get out of the housing business."

The Act that liquidated the FSA in August, 1946, less than a decade after its birth, simultaneously replaced it with an agency more suitable to the times.

Unlike its more daring predecessor, which had dreamed of promoting empowerment among the rural poor, the new Farmers Home Administration (or FmHA, as it came to be called) dreamed hardly at all, and seldom about the poor.

At that early juncture in the agency's career, the provision of migrant farmworker housing was a very low-priority item; and when new housing projects were eventually financed, they developed along pre-FSA lines, with the growers again the landlords and in firm control. Indeed, Title V of the 1949 Housing Act authorized financial assistance *only* to "owners of farms" to provide "them, their tenants, lessees, sharecroppers, and laborers with decent, safe and sanitary living conditions...."

There remained, however, the matter of disposing of the old FSA camps. At first this was done, under instructions from Congress, in accord with prevailing post-war sentiment, which held that private was preferable to public and local was better than national. But as Taylor has approvingly observed, the Department of Agriculture dragged its heels, being "reluctant to take the easier course of disposing of [the camps] to employers' associations until Congress could be brought to face squarely the issue of public versus employer ownership...."

In the end (1950) Congress did make an oblique turn, providing for the camps' takeover and management by local Public Housing Authorities—a compromise meant to preserve localism while expunging privatism. But from the migrants' standpoint that middle road spelled trouble, since most

Public Housing Authorities in rural America were controlled by the growers, and they tended from the start to run the public camps like private fiefdoms.

As we shall see, they still do.

With the FSA dead and a more friendly agency a-borning, the growers now saw a chance to clinch their triumph by getting Congress to restore the huge farm/labor surpluses they had enjoyed before Pearl Harbor. In a booming economy, heated up by the Korean War, this was no easy task, but in 1951 Congress obliged by passing Public Law 78, which empowered the Secretary of Labor to contract for as many Mexican temporary workers as the Secretary of Agriculture deemed necessary.

This was the start of the notorious *braceros* program (*braceros* means "strong-armed men"), which lasted through 1964. In 14 years it supplied American growers with more than five million skilled, low-wage, seasonal workers from Mexico—a "well-nigh perfect" work force that broke the heart of many a labor organizer in the fields.

It is clear in retrospect that these nationally-sponsored measures—all of them plucked hastily from the post-war crucible of reaction—have played a fateful role in shaping the modern migrant experience. By dismantling the FSA, we discarded the migrant workers' single best hope for achieving economic strength and political solidarity. By replacing the FSA with an agency dedicated mainly to the welfare of commercial farmers, we effectively deprived farmworkers of their most powerful ally, the federal government. By pretending that "Public Housing" was synonymous with "public control," we consigned farmworker families and their housing needs to the tender mercies of growers masquerading as public-spirited citizens. And by initiating the *braceros* program, we created a social and economic climate virtually guaranteed to divide workers, depress wages and exacerbate housing problems. Henceforth, whatever legislation was passed on behalf of farmworkers, and whatever programs were launched, would leave the structure of agriculture and its labor practices largely untouched; the thrust would be more philanthropic than political.

The record of these past 30 years has not been wholly written in tears: *some* reforms have been instituted; *some* money has been spent; *some* families have been decently housed. The number of migrant farmworkers, moreover, appears to have diminished from its peak in the Fifties. So although the problems remain, fewer people suffer from them.

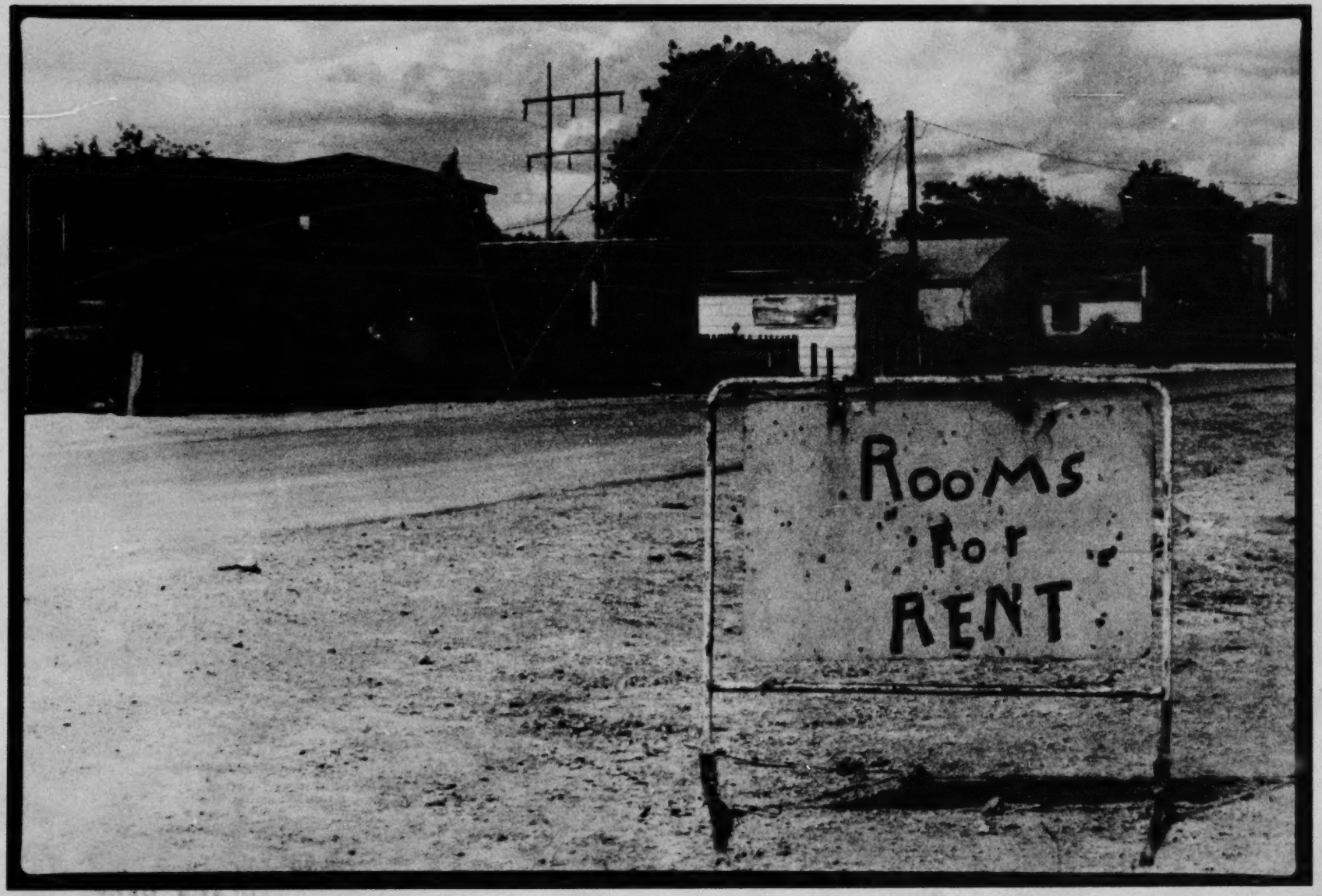
Yet all the predictions of the "stream" drying up, of the migrants somehow vanishing in the wake of farm technology, have proved baseless. The century and a half record still suggests that so long as there are "ripening tides," there will be migrant workers to follow them.

As one travels through the land of the migrants, the overwhelming impression one gets is of a captive people isolated in space and trapped in time. Both the entrapment and the isolation are contrivances of the local communities as well as the employers—ways of simultaneously shunning and manipulating the farmworkers, of keeping them down while using them up.

Very little has changed since the President's Commission on Farm Labor observed in 1951 that the workers "pass through community after community, but they neither claim the community as home, nor does the community claim them...."

In such a world, history rides a single broom; the past keeps melting into the present in a seamless continuum of wretchedness and oppression.

In the following section we shall explore the latest moment in that continuum.



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Homes of the Brave

"If you stand next to my shack on a hot day, you can hear the paint peeling."
—a farmworker in Texas

"Growers have done a very good job of not admitting that they need migrants, or that migrants need housing."
—a Public Housing official in Colorado

While much of this section will focus on the characteristics of "average" farmworker housing—by which I mean the sort of commonplace shelter I saw every day in my travels from camp to camp—it should be understood that the *range* of housing quality extended in both directions beyond that miserable mean. A few camps were better than average; many were worse.

The best example I saw by far was Farmworker Village, a 276-unit Public Housing project in Immokalee, Florida. Built in the mid-Seventies as a model effort—a demonstration of what money and commitment could accomplish—the project boasts well-tended, campus-like grounds and a goodly proportion of large apartments. (More than half provide three or more bedrooms.)

But Farmworker Vlilage must be considered a rare oasis in an all but total housing desert. That is why the development's managers are constantly playing host to reporters and investigators. The visitors are sent there by Washington officials who have little else in the way of decent farmworker housing to show the curious.

Here and there—in eastern Michigan, for example, or on Colorado's Western Slope—I found small, well-maintained settlements that offered clean quarters and adequate facilities. This was especially true of those camps reserved exclusively for male workers. Having left their wives and children back home in Texas or Mexico, the men seemed content to live barracks-style, sleeping in bunk beds and, at many of the camps, eating in community kitchens. The tenants of such places generally comprised a kind of elite migrant corps. They were steady, reliable workers who had been toiling many consecutive summers for the same employers. Decent housing and competitive wages assured the workers' return each year.

And the housing *was* comparatively decent. Buildings had been freshly painted. Holes in the walls had been calked and screens had been patched. Outdoor privies were kept clean and seemed not unduly malodorous. As often as not, a real lawn fronted the cottages, with step-stone paths leading away from each screen door. The men responded to all this in predictably positive ways: they mowed their lawns, landscaped their entranceways and cultivated their small gardens.

True, by middle-class American standards even these exemplary camps seemed barely habitable. Indoor plumbing was a rarity, as were such amenities as closets, rugs, window shades and curtains. The frequently cramped quarters tried the men's patience and tested their tempers. Arguments sometimes broke out. Nevertheless, in the migrant world such camps were genuine Gardens of Eden—which says as much about the migrant world as it does about the camps.

Increasingly now, the world of the migrant is bounded by a shortage of decent housing and by a parallel shortage of national concern. (Call it an energy crisis—a sharp depletion in moral energy.)

Long term deterioration is the variable that defines both sides of the equation.

According to estimates made in the "National Farmworker Housing Study" (InterAmerica Research Associates, December 1980), two-thirds of all migrant farmworkers, or about 800,000 people, must make do with inadequate shelter, most of which was built *before* 1960. Meanwhile, the two major federal programs created specifically to address the housing problem have, since the early Sixties, accounted for fewer than 20,000 new or rehabilitated units.

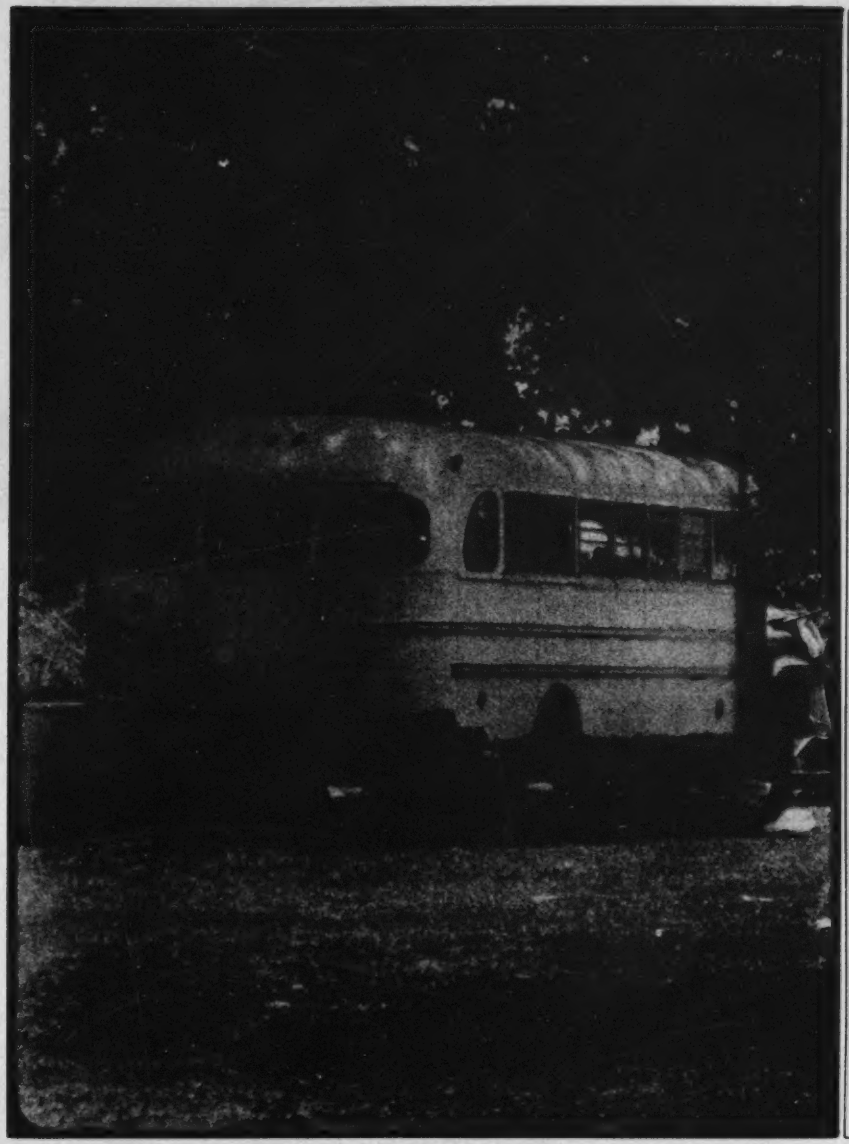
In effect, an entire generation of Americans has succeeded in doing nothing to solve the migrant housing problem, while remaining secure in the illusion that much is being done.

A good deal of testimony at the Farmworker Housing Coalition hearings focused on this particular pretense and its baneful consequences. Typical was the lament of Lupe Martinez, a former migrant worker and now director of United Migrant Opportunities in Wisconsin. After 20 years of officially stated intentions to solve the problems of farmworker housing, Martinez complained, "We haven't even scratched the surface. I don't expect miracles . . . . But it just seems frustrating as hell to go through this . . . . "

What we shall examine here is the housing behind the pretense—the tents, shacks and tenements that, flimsy as they are, have not blown down or been replaced by all the huffing and puffing that emanates from Washington.

We shall begin, however, with some observations on *non*-housing. That is, on the ways migrants and their employers have responded to the cruel shortages of shelter that plague much of agricultural life today. From there we shall proceed to a look at the camps: the facilities they offer, the spaces they provide, the environments they create and the sufferings they engender.

Non-Housing: Beneath the Cherry Trees



A quiet desperation among farmworkers is breaking up migrant "streams," those human currents that have flowed each summer from south to north in rough accord with the nation's agricultural clock. Nowadays, families are foresaking traditional migratory channels in favor of less familiar, less patterned paths: from Florida to Maryland to Minnesota—to cite the itinerary of one farmworker family I encountered last summer—and thence to California and Colorado.

Such criss-crossings of the continent have become commonplace. To an outsider they may seem aimless and pointless, but in fact they are a reasonable response to an unreasonable dilemma. For what the migrants are pursuing is not only work, which in most regions remains available, but also shelter, which everywhere has grown scarce.

Last June in Michigan, for example, according to a migrant attorney there, thousands of just-arrived farmworkers from the South were politely advised to leave the state. "We had no housing for them," the attorney explained.

In California the shortage is so painful that farmworkers get in line for shelter. Susanna Halpon, who works for California Rural Legal Assistance, described at one Coalition hearing the queueing up for housing in San Joaquin County, where the state manages three camps of approximately 100 units apiece:

> *There is such a shortage of housing that for those three migrant camps you have people lining up right before they are open—like up to four days ahead of the time—hoping, since the camps are run on a first-come, first-served basis, that they can be the ones to be accommodated . . . . They literally line up for days ahead. They sleep in cars.*

Ms. Halpon says the lines last spring got so long that at least one of the camps changed its admission rules by displaying a new sign. "The migrant center will open April 11," the sign said. "Families forming a line before the opening date will be the last in line to get a number."

Although not one federal official of rank has publicly acknowledged the existence of a farmworker housing crisis, its omnipresence has become an accepted fact of rural life. Local citizens recognize it; farmers and landlords reinforce it; bureaucrats routinely take it into account.

Frequently nowadays, farmworkers are recruited on a let-the-migrant-beware basis, meaning the migrants must arrive at the workplace with their homes on their backs.

Last July in Grand Junction,

Colorado, the Migrant Council—which, among other things, serves local growers as a recruiting agency—sent the following message to Navajos in Arizona getting ready to come north and pick cherries: "Make sure your families are prepared to camp out."

Wherever I traveled I saw farmworker families "camping out"—setting up housekeeping in their cars and trucks, cooking meals by the roadside, sleeping in ditches or beneath bridges. It was clear that growers had discovered they could attract an adequate labor force without the inconvenience of offering adequate housing in exchange.

At the Antelope Hill cherry orchard in Colorado, for example, housing was provided for only 15 of the 150 hired pickers. The rest slept where they worked—beneath the trees.

Leticia Gonzales, a 23-year-old migrant worker, recalled conditions she and her family faced in orchards near Stockton, California, "where cherry pickers had migrated by the hundreds":

Ten camps were set along irrigation canals which provided the water supply for bathing, washing and frog hunting, an appreciated food service . . . . I still bathe in irrigation canals, sleep under the cherry trees I will pick at dawn, and hope for a better life. (California Coalition hearing)

As often as not, those who do find shelter are only slightly better off than those who sleep under trees. For the shortage of housing in migrant camps has driven farmworker families into nearby towns, jamming as many as a dozen persons into a single, miserable room, encouraging outrageously high rents and allowing landlords to abandon needed maintenance and repairs.

In Homestead, Florida, for example, I visited a settlement of battered two-room trailers, each providing shelter to three families. In one of those trailers I counted 32 occupants.

In Federalsburg, Maryland I was shown a ramshackle three-story frame house, totally gutted and dangerously sagging, that until its recent condemnation by the county had been home to 47 farmworkers unable to find shelter in any camp. My guide said the landlord had charged $10 per week per person, which gave him an income from that one dwelling of about $2,000 a month. For that he provided only a leaky roof, crumbling walls and a rotting floor—no furniture, no electricity, no heat, no plumbing. In fact, there wasn't even a staircase. Large sections of the existing staircase had given way the previous winter.

The farmworker housing shortage affects nearly all sectors of rural America, but its lash is perhaps most keenly felt in Florida, where thousands of workers, many of them undocumented, have recently arrived from Mexico, Haiti, Jamaica, Dominica and Cuba. Moreover, quite a few Florida-based farmworkers who in previous summers had gone north to work this year stayed home, a reaction chiefly to the high price of gasoline. In consequence, wages in Florida have been declining while rents have been rising.

In some places landlords now make venal distinctions between undocumented and legal workers, charging the former by the person and the latter by the family. "At the height of the tomato season," a migrant representative in Immokalee told me, "they stuff a dozen people in a trailer and charge ten bucks a head each week. It's surprising they don't charge by the finger."

In Immokalee, LaBelle and Homestead I also saw hundreds of workers keeping "house" in the open, besides canals and irrigation ditches. It was cheaper than renting a corner of a trailer, and the facilities were only a shade inferior.

Not surprisingly, the housing crisis was a recurrent theme at the Coalition's hearings. Here is a sampling of the many comments.

Jose Padilla, a farmworker living in the Florida Everglades region:

In this area we have a farmworker housing situation that is very terrible. There has been an influx of brand new people coming in here . . . and there are less trailers available at the Everglades Trailer Camp. There is also a shortage of housing all over Homestead and Florida City.

. . . I for one am now living in a . . . dump which I call home. I will soon be evicted . . . because the darn thing is being condemned. The county inspector found 200 deficiencies in there.

Chris Larson, who is with Florida Legal Services in Immokalee, called the housing shortage there "extremely acute":

There may be 10-15,000 farmworkers in Collier County . . . who came here to pick vegetables [yet] the capacity of permanent migrant labor camps in 1978 was 3,895.

Larson also cited a recent local news story describing typical farmworker housing conditions in the area. The story began: "When Linda Bentley gives birth to her fourth child this month, the baby will be the 18th resident of the family's cramped quarters"—a three-bedroom shack in a migrant labor camp.

A telling description of the housing crisis and its attendant ills was presented by Robert Marshall, director of Self-Help Enterprises in C[illegible]rnia. Among

other things, Marshall told of "an old wooden house" in Kettleman City that his staff had come upon. The house had three bedrooms "in which ten people were residing":

The drain lines from the bathroom and the kitchen had been disconnected from the old septic tank, which was full and caving in, and the sewage was running directly on the ground under the house. When our people first observed it, in spots there was three feet of raw sewage.

Upon inquiring about the occupancy of the house, it was learned that there were ten undocumented farmworkers who were paying $75 to $100 per person per month to the labor contractor, who in turn was turning over only $100 per month to the grower who had rented the house from its owner. Not only were these residents being grossly overcharged, but their health was being endangered, as well as that of the community . . . .

The migrants' desperate need for shelter, said Marshall, has lured home-owning farmworkers into the rental business: "The desire to make extra money through renting out part of the house or taking in relatives, since they have no place to go, creates the situation." As a result, Marshall reported:

We have frequently seen very light-weight extension cords strung from one house to a shack or to a rotting mobile home where farmworkers were staying. Fires due to faulty and inadequate electrical systems are common . . . . Our staff has gone into homes where the heaters were unvented and found families complaining of coughs and headaches. If most of the shacks were not so poorly weatherstripped and were not so open to the winter elements, there would be more deaths by asphyxiation among the inhabitants. (California Coalition hearing)

Several who testified found a connection between housing shortages and farmworker peonage. For example, a representative of the Migrant Farmworkers Law Unit in Caldwell, Idaho stated:

A housing shortage puts the landlord . . . in control . . . Since the farmworker has little or no choice as to where he and his family will live for the season, he must endure the substandard housing while paying excessive rents.

D. Michael Dale of Oregon Legal Services made a similar point, noting that migrants are generally admitted to the camps "only if they will be working for the grower-owner":

. . . Because no other housing is available, migrant farmworkers lose the traditional right of American workers to seek better pay and working conditions with other employers. Their dependence upon the grower for their housing holds them in a state of near serfdom . . . . Any effort at improving work conditions or pay in their existing jobs through collective bargaining or negotiation can be met with swift loss, not only of employment, but of housing as well.

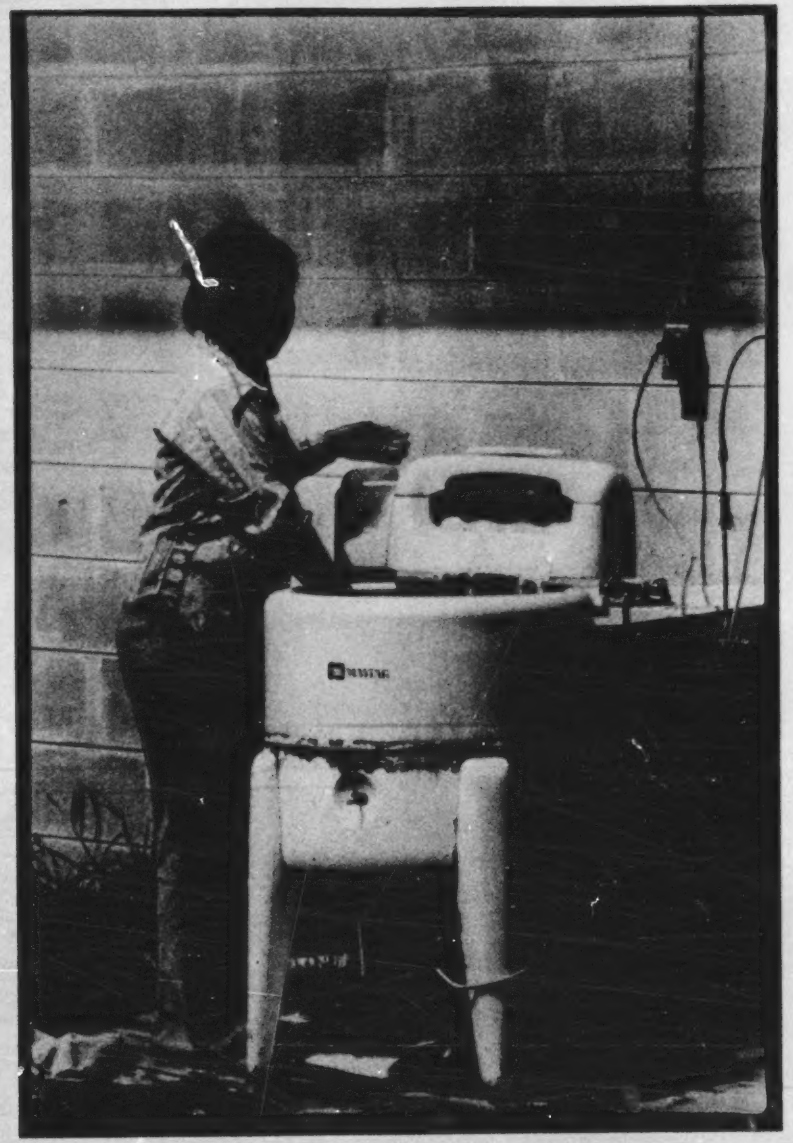
Finally, there was testimony concerning housing-shortage hardships on migrants hoping to "settle out" of the stream. Eduardo Luna, who directs the weatherization program of Michigan Economics for Human Development (MEHD), mentioned one such family of seasonal farmworkers in Caro, Michigan:

They have been [paying for] this house for years . . . . The purchase of the house is an attempt to settle out. I audited the house and found half the roof of the second floor is rotted. Half of the kitchen roof is rotted . . . Inside, the wallpaper is peeling off; the plaster is breaking because of water leakage.

"Farmworkers," said Luna, "put their hopes and incomes into trying to create a home for the family and themselves." But because there are not enough houses, "no positive results have been achieved."

We turn now to conditions in the camps.

Soap



We might begin with the Cruz family—a wife, a husband, six children—whom I visited in their two-room quarters at Gilcrest, a migrant farmworker camp owned by Blue Hill Products and located some 40 miles north of Denver. As we shall see, theirs is essentially a domestic tale, having to do with washtubs and soap and a need, in the grimiest of circumstances, to keep clean. But it also has to do with isolation and powerlessness. In the dust of migrant camps all the elements—the abstract as well as the homely—tend to get scrambled.

For much of the year the Cruz family lives in Brownsville, Texas, but each summer they pile into their "pickup" and ride to Colorado. There Hector Cruz works with a hoe in the sugar beet fields that surround Gilcrest, weeding and thinning for wages that amount to $35 per worked acre.

In a good week Mr. Cruz and his hoe can render about seven acres of Colorado soil temporarily weedless. It is hot, dusty work, and the rows of young beet plants can seem malignly infinite, marching in straight, parallel ranks towards a point where earth touches sky. Each receding aisle presents Hector Cruz and his fellow workers with a foretaste of tomorrow's weariness.

Sometimes the older Cruz children work in the fields too. The extra money they earn helps keep the family supplied with two essential sources of energy: gasoline and food. But Hector's wife, Estella, stays in the camp with the younger children. For four months, from June through September, the high fences of Gilcrest are the boundaries of their lives.

"What do the children do all day?" I asked Mrs. Cruz.

"They run around outside. They watch tv."

'And what do *you* do all day?"

"I clean," she said, pointing to a broom by the door. "And I wash. Mostly I wash clothes. They get very dirty in the fields. I have to wait my turn at the tub." The camp provides two small tubs for the 120 residents. All day and through part of the night the women are at the tubs.

One afternoon, working at the washboard, Estella Cruz ran out of soap. She called to Roberto, her 15-year-old boy: "Go to the store and get a bar of soap"—a simple instruction that turned out to have complex consequences.

Roberto's problem was deciding how to get to the store. Migrant camps are customarily built on sites convenient to the work but inconvenient for the workers, and Gilcrest was no exception. The nearest store required a trip to LaSalle, a town six miles down the road. As Roberto saw it, he could walk the 12 miles or he could risk a quick ride in the family pickup. Being an adolescent, he made the wrong choice, and before another

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hour had passed he found himself in the LaSalle police station, facing charges of speeding and of driving without a license.

The truck, a policeman told Hector Cruz that evening, had been "impounded." In fact, it had been returned to the local used car dealer from whom Mr. Cruz had bought it the previous summer and to whom he had been making regular $15-a-month payments ever since. It is a measure of the farmworkers' status in such towns that the LaSalle police instantly assumed the Cruz's truck was ripe for repossession.

Eventually, with the help of an attorney from Rural Legal Services, the judicial knot was cut: Roberto got a suspended sentence and the family got back its truck. But not before Hector had lost several days' wages attempting to reclaim boy and wheels. For the Cruz family, then, the price of a bar of soap was about $100. If they'd had the leisure to think about it, they might have considered it part of the rent—a routine penalty imposed upon families so luckless as to be sojourning at Gilcrest.

Sad to say, the Cruz story—both its plot and its setting—typifies many of the hardships that regularly beset farmworker families: their segregation from the larger community; their consequent isolation from stores, clinics and other local institutions; their perpetual (and losing) battle with the dust and dirt that pervade their lives; and their struggle in the camps to make do with the sparse, primitive amenities provided.

What finally emerges from such tales is a sense of the farmworkers' *constant vulnerability*. Unlike the rest of us, migrant families enjoy no margin for error, no rainy-day resources they can draw on to nullify mistakes or deflect the darker fates. In a farmworker's life the most routine mishap (no more soap) can quickly develop into a major misery (loss of a precious half-week's wages).

'Migrant Modern'

My guide at Gilcrest had described the camp, with no trace of irony, as "one of Colorado's finest." And given the strangely careless standards by which most of us judge farmworker conditions, Gilcrest did measure up. Its architectural style could be called Migrant Modern: a long, gray, motel-like building squatting near the highway, the paint fading and peeling in the hot sun, the screens torn, many of the doors hanging by a single hinge. At the far end of the tenement one came upon a separate, concrete structure, which housed the showers, toilets and washtubs. Any slight breeze instantly carried dust to the eyes and a small of excrement to the nostrils.

Fronting all this was a "yard," brown and barren, that uncannily resembled the yards Jacob Riis discovered in his wanderings a century ago through the slums of New York: "... a bewildering maze of clothes—posts and lines; underfoot, a desert of brown, hard-baked soil from which every blade of grass, every stray weed, every speck of green, had been trodden out...."

Migrant families consigned to such camps resist the Sahara-like landscape as best they can, sometimes planting shrubs by their doors, more often filling their rooms with artificial flowers.

When, on rare occasions, a farmworker happens to get a decent housing break, he or she is likely to go on a chlorylphyll binge. In Apopka, Florida, for example, I visited a just-built farmworker subdivision that had been sponsored by a non-profit group, Homes in Partnership. Long before the houses were ready for occupancy, the new owners were planting flowers and shrubs. According to the construction foreman, the future residents had already ordered "four miles of sod."

Camps like Gilcrest look abandoned even when they are occupied. They show no sign of having been touched by a caring hand. There is no evidence of repair or renewal. The general decay and disarray resemble what one would expect to find in a ghost town. "If you stand next to my shack on a hot day," a farmworker in Texas told me, "you can hear the paint peeling."

A story told at the Michigan Coalition hearing by Guillermo Martinez, who works for MEHD, demonstrates the extent to which owners may neglect their camps. During the Fifties, said Martinez,

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he and his family migrated every summer from Texas to Michigan.

We lived in the Van Buren county area in several of the camps. And during that time... some of the people were making graffiti in the cabins, and one of the persons that did it was my brother. Well, going back to work in that area [for MEHD], I was able to return to the exact camp where we had migrated to. And in visiting with the families, 20 years later , . . . I still found my brother's initials in the cabin where we used to live....

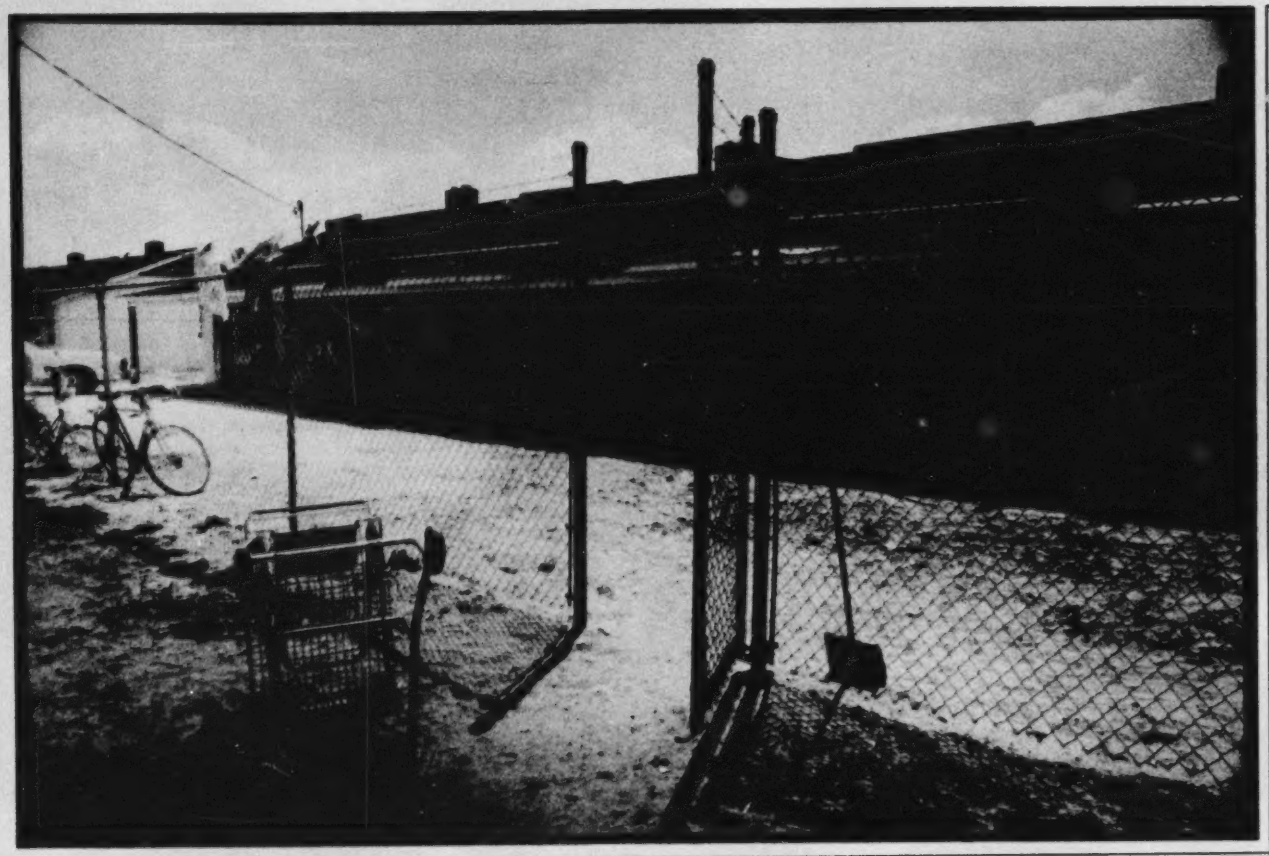
It is not the owners alone who have abandoned their camps. In some respects the residents, too, have written them off. During the day, while everyone else is at work in the fields, the women and small children who stay "home" seldom venture forth from their dark rooms (except to wash clothes).

There is little enough to do in the shadeless, trash-littered yard: no playground for the children, no meeting place for the women, no sense of community for anyone. So people remain behind their doors, each locked inside the same dingy scenario. A visitor strolling through one of those empty camp yards is likely to hear nothing save the flapping of torn screens in the wind.

At night, with everyone home from the fields, the boredom and sense of entrapment grow more oppressive. Quarters are cramped and walls are thin. "People can go stir crazy," says Rebecca Belew, a former migrant worker from Michigan. "Someone might start screaming at someone else. Pretty soon lots of people are screaming. You can hear every fight, every argument. There's no privacy. My husband and I, we'd be awake half the night trying not to listen.

"If there wasn't any noise, I might lie awake anyway, trying to get up enough nerve to go out back to the bathroom in the dark. I couldn't ever learn to live with walking to the bathroom. It felt like the whole earth was moving beneath me. Finally, we got a pee-pot."

Alienation



A resident of Mascotte, Florida took me to see the town's new baseball park, paid for in part by a Community Development Block Grant from Washington. It was quite a park, complete with bleacher-stands, lights for night games and a magnificent electric scoreboard to remind spectators who was winning and who was losing. The real losers, however, were the farmworkers who lived next-door to the park.

"People on their way to a baseball game don't like driving through a slum," my guide explained. "They want the town to tear down the shacks."

"Where will the people go?"

She shrugged. "Who knows? Somewhere out of sight, I guess."

Mascotte could as easily have sought federal funds for the improvement of farmworker housing as for the installation of a ball park, but the farmworkers were neither on the town's mind nor in the town's budget. It was a measure of their total alienation from the rest of the community that the farmworkers were noticed only when they happened to be in the way. Even then, what they mostly attracted was not sympathy but resentment.

The Mascotte reaction to migrant hardships was typical. What most local citizens wanted migrant workers to be was invisible. Occasionally, however, the farmworker families got "lucky," which is to say their mounting miseries overflowed in ways that an embarrassed community could no longer overlook.

In Homestead, Florida, it took a typhoid epidemic in the camps, plus the drowning of five migrant children in an open ditch, to persuade authorities that some new housing might not be amiss.

In Weld County, Colorado, a few camps were built or rehabilitated after thousands of homeless migrants established "Tent City" right in the middle of town. Even so, county planners the next year were capable of publishing a 130-page "Housing Plan"—a document that purported to "identify and characterize Weld County housing needs"—without once mentioning farmworker shelter.

The fear and uncertainty that haunt migrant souls, that sickening sense of shifting ground beneath them, are heartaches that come with the territory. They reflect farmworker helplessness as well as community contempt, two curses that in the lives of most

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migrants function as one.

In many of the larger, company-owned camps I visited it was clear that the families had bartered their freedom for their suppers and shelters. The "No Trespassing" signs that greeted visitors at the gates and the high, hurricane fences topped with barbed wire that surrounded the camps suggested that these places were less "migrant centers"—to use a federal euphemism—than they were maximum security prisons.

Indeed, the unfortunate farmworkers who occupied such compounds were required to follow a regimen that might have been the envy of an Attica warden. Rising each day at dawn, they were transported by bus to the corporate fields, there to labor in the sun for from eight to 12 hours. When the foreman judged the day's work complete, he herded the migrants into the bus again and thence back to camp, where an early curfew was customarily imposed. Any refusal by a worker to submit to these strictures could mean instant eviction.

The farmworkers' virtual incarceration suited the needs of the growers and the sensibilities of their neighbors, the local residents.

For growers, the system assured them a supply of strong bodies always at hand, bodies that could be "stored" behind fences each night and, like pawns on a chessboard, moved to appropriate squares each day.

To make sure the bodies stayed stored, the growers invented rules. In Mesa County, Colorado, for instance, some camp owners evicted all farmworkers who had cars. "We bus them to work and we bus them back," a grower said when I asked him about the no-car rule. "What do they need cars for?"

Some camps I saw in Florida had opened company stores, which the residents—either through isolation or intimidation—felt compelled to patronize. A carton of cigarettes at one of those stores might cost as much as $10: a six-pack of beer, $5. The charges, of course, were deducted from the farmworker's pay each week, often in ways that brooked no argument. As one farmworker explained, "The boss sits there at a table with his bookkeeper and hands out the pay. A revolver lies on the table. Nobody complains."

For citizens who lived near these camps, the segregation of farmworkers seemed ideal. That way, the migrants could contribute their labor to the local community without the community's feeling bound to contribute anything in return. Good fences made good workers.

Some towns in eastern Michigan, I was told by an MEHD staff member, were off-limits to farmworkers, not by force of law but by dread of violence. Young toughs on motorcycles patrolled the streets, looking for any farmworkers so careless as to have wandered into town. The police, meanwhile, looked the other way.

Is it any wonder that migrants are reluctant to protest, that they seek safety in silence? To speak out, to insist upon being recognized, to be anything but a body that gleans and gathers is to invite an awful punishment: dismissal, eviction, terror.

One day last summer, at a small camp in Wattenberg, Colorado, Maria Gomez gave me a dramatic tour of her two-room apartment (for which she paid $175 a month). "See the holes in the wall," she said. "See the rat droppings in the corner. Now look up at the ceiling: you can see the sky right through the ceiling. The rain comes down from the sky and falls on my sleeping children." She was close to tears.

"I don't light the oven any more," she said, "because roaches run out. But I will light it for you." She bent down and ignited the gas oven. Instantly a horde of black roaches scurried out the oven door. Mrs. Gomez shuddered and slammed the door.

"Do you ever complain to the landlord?" I asked.

"No," she replied. "I don't like to make trouble."

Dirt

If cleanliness is next to godliness, then it appears unlikely that God resides next door to a migrant camp. Most of the farmworkers I interviewed, especially the women, named dirt as their Number One problem—the dirt that saturated their clothes, the trash that filled their yards, the dust that settled everywhere.

"I sweep and I sweep," a woman in a Michigan camp told me, "but it doesn't go away. It gets inside our skins."

The dirt is often a breeding ground for unwanted guests:

So we went in that trailer, and we are staying there now; but the place is infested with rats and roaches. And, well, the flies from those garbage cans . . . they go inside the house. We spray them for a little while. They come back there, in the house. There's no screens on the windows and it's dirty. We have a lot of problems with flies, but that's the way it is.

. . . And in there I stayed two weeks, and my baby got sick. I've been taking him to the clinic, . . . and they send him back home and he gets sick all over again, diarrhea and all that. And my little girl was screaming, saying the rat was going to bite her. (Juana Cruz, Florida hearing)

Although some of the camps provide tenants with private toilets and showers, most have settled for outdoor or communal facilities—and these are nearly always unsatisfactory. The toilets get plugged up; the showers break down; the hot water runs out.

At a Michigan camp one evening I saw dozens of men, just returned from the fields, lined up in front of the shower compound waiting to get in. "Sometimes I wait two hours or more," one of the men told me. "By then there's no hot water."

Here are two descriptions of the sanitary facilities at Camp Emmett, in Idaho, presented at the Northwest Coalition hearing.

The screens were torn off the showers; . . . three sinks had standing stagnant water. There were eight stalls, two completely nailed shut; three were functional. There was a tremendous number of flies, and a stench. There were broken beer bottles on the floor. (Judy Clayton,

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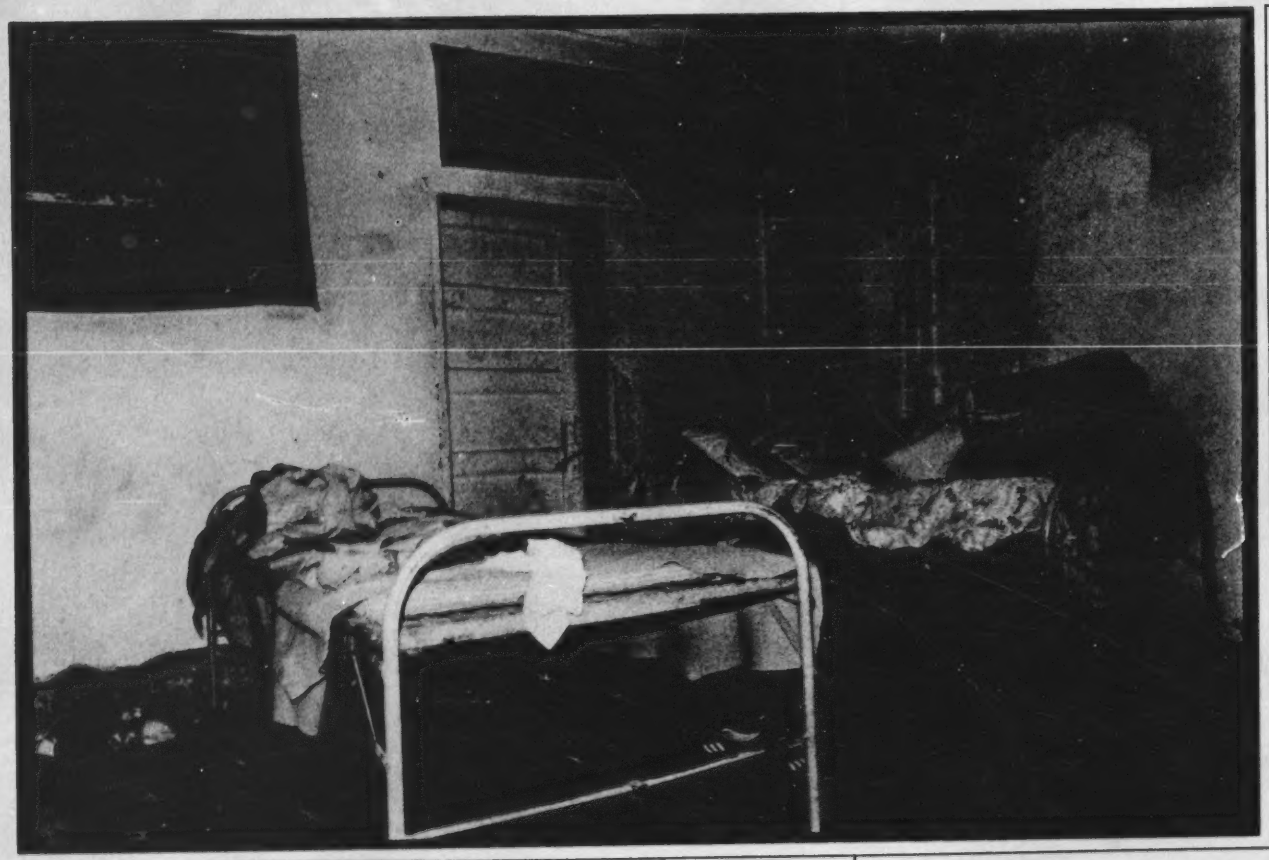
director of the Idaho Hunger Council)

The stench from the men's bathroom was so bad that I could not force myself to enter to take pictures . . . Excrement has been found on the floors of the bathroom. It has also been found on the ground, since the tenants cannot bring themselves to use the bathrooms. (A representative of the Migrant Farmworkers Law Unit)

Even in so-called "better camps," such as those owned by the state of California, the sanitary facilities are often inadequate. At California's Harney Lane camp, according to testimony by Ms. Halpon, "there are no indoor toilets . . . . There is one [outdoor] toilet for about seven cabins—one toilet for men and one toilet for women, and one shower for men and one shower for women. Families have to get up and get dressed and go out and stand in line at 3:00 in the morning so that they can get to work on time . . . . " And Harney Lane was a migrant center that farmworker families couldn't wait to get in—one of those at whose gates migrants began queueing up four days in advance of the camp's opening.

Such is the tyranny of housing so scarce that it has farmworkers pleading to be exploited. One day in central Michigan I came upon a typically tawdry camp of 74 hovels and a half-dozen privies. It was owned by a grower named Hassell. "I wanted to close this camp years ago," he told me, "but the people begged me to keep it open." I believed him. In the migrant world, choices tend to be few—and all are unacceptable.

Furnishings



In Plymouth, Florida, one warm Sunday in June I watched a neighborhood of farmworkers empty out. All along the block people were clearing out their shacks and loading their pickups, getting ready to go north for the summer. Nomads are said to travel light, but that may be less a strategy than a necessity: they have so little to take with them.

"We bring just about everything we own," one of the men told me. He and his family were on their way to South Carolina. "Clothes, mattresses, a hot plate, the tv—whatever we can squeeze into the truck. No, we leave the furniture here. The camp's supposed to give you furniture. I say *supposed* to. Sometimes it doesn't work that way."

Like on Donalsville, Georgia, when I first moved in, all the rent lady did was give me a mattress. Wasn't no hot water. Wasn't no cold water. Wasn't no electricity. Wasn't nothing but a mattress in there. (Jerome King, a migrant worker, at the Florida Coalition hearing)

That day in Plymouth, one of the families loading up gave me permission to take inventory. I climbed aboard the truck and made a list of the family's possessions:

1 box of hair curlers
1 television set
1 hot plate (electric cord missing)
3 mattresses and 2 bed springs
1 small grey rug (scorched)
1 ticking clock
7 torn blankets
2 boxes of clothes
1 box of diapers (disposable)
2 baby bottles
1 busted guitar
1 transistor radio
1 bicycle (front wheel missing)
3 rubber dolls
1 calendar (with pictures of wild flowers)
1 framed wall-hanging: "With God, all things are possible"
1 framed photograph (young man in U.S. Army uniform)
assorted cups, spoons, knives, forks
assorts pots and pans
assorted boots
assorted crayons
assorted food: catsup, salt, Twinkies, bread, milk, Dr. Pepper, beer

It was a fair sample of what migrant families carry with them when they go on the road—a judicious blend of utility and sentiment. Among all the items

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listed, I would rate the calendar as the most important. Nearly every migrant family has one on its wall—not just for decoration, I suspect, but for the sake of marking the passage of time, a slippery phenomenon in the nomad's life.

In Delaware, for instance, I visited a migrant mother and her seven children in a quonset hut they were renting from their employer. The walls of the hut were bare, except for a homemade calendar hanging over a bed. It had been pieced together with scissors, crayons and paste.

"Did you make that?" I asked the mother.

"Yes. I wanted to know when we are."

Just as the calendar is proof against the blurring of migrant days, the bedding that families take with them is meant to assure smooth passage of migrant nights. In theory, the camp proprietor must supply beds and mattresses; but not all farmworkers nowadays can find a camp that will let them in; and even when they can, there is often a waiting period of several days, during which the family has no place to live but by the road and no place to sleep but on its mattresses. Besides, few camps supply enough beds to go around. The demands are too great and the spaces are too small. Many of the rooms I visited, even the kitchens, were jammed with mattresses from wall to wall. In a migrant home, every room is a bedroom.

The Ramirezes—two adults and seven children—were among the many migrants last summer who could not get into a camp. So they rented an unfurnished, two-room shack in Dillard, Colorado, for which they paid $75 a month plus utilities. The house had no bathroom and no hot water. An unpainted outhouse stood near a patch of weeds out back. The gas stove and electric refrigerator were supplied by the landlord, but neither worked, though one burner on the stove could sometimes be coaxed into sputtering ignition. The day I was there a pot of water was boiling atop that burner, and the kitchen was heavy with the smell of gas.

"I think maybe the stove makes my baby sick," Mrs. Ramirez said. "I think that's why she always cries."

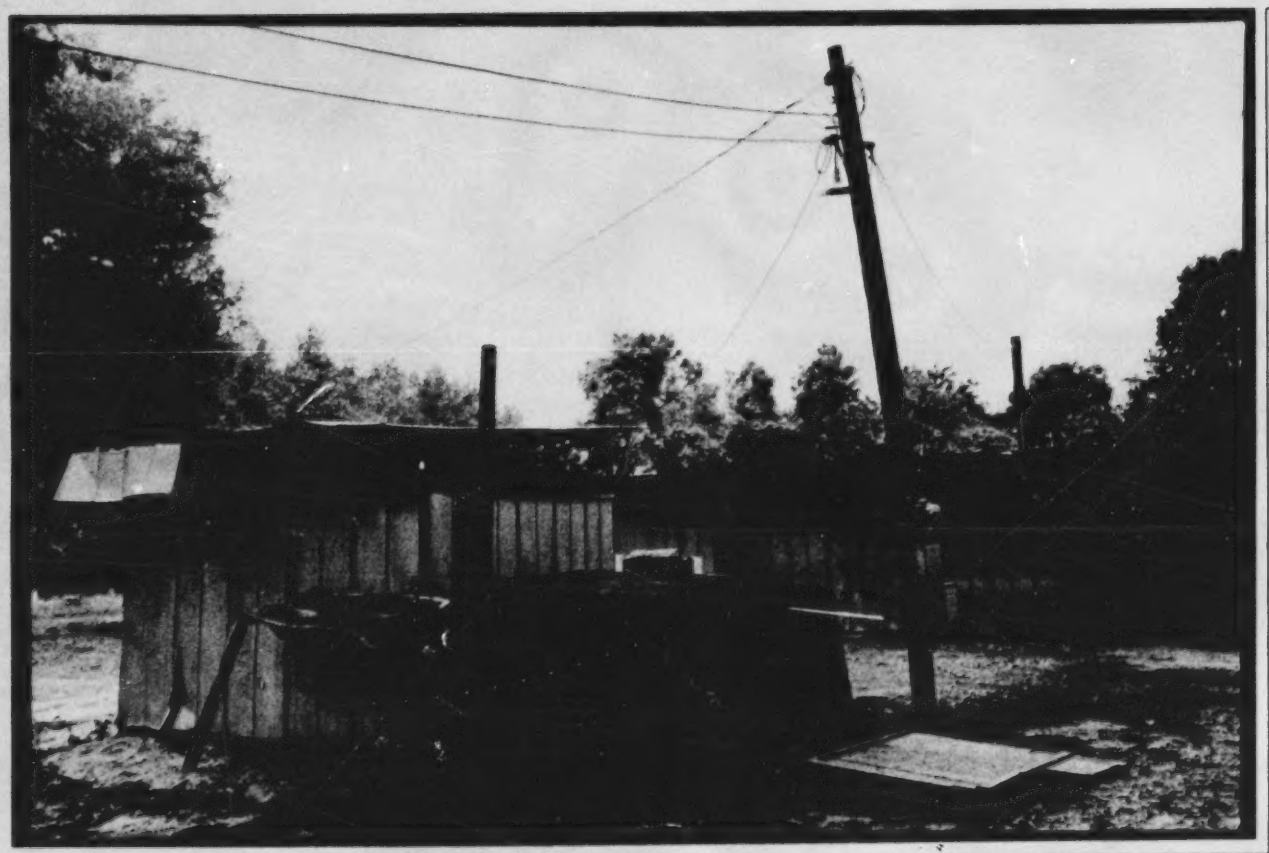
Faulty facilities can make people sick. Christine Williams knows that, because she supervises the Groveland Community Clinic, a health center for migrants in central Florida. The clinic opened in October 1979, and although it employs only one physician and one assistant, it has already accumulated more than 20,000 "active patient" charts—testimony both to the staff's dedication and to the migrants' need.

"When it rains," Ms. Williams told me, "the clinic is full, because no one is working in the fields. The parents try hard to take good care of their children. They are the most devoted family people I've ever met."

"We get a lot of rat bites and insect bites," she continued, "on account of the overcrowding and the unsanitary conditions. But mostly we get stomach problems—food poisoning and the like. People don't have refrigerators to keep their food from spoiling, or a stove to cook on. They have to eat most of their food raw."

Health workers in other states reported similar problems, nearly all of them related to shoddy housing. "The most common troubles around here," said a health worker in Lansing, Michigan, "are lice, worms, and parasites that come from bad water—when the pump is too close to the outhouse. Hepatitis is another disease we see a lot of. We had a hepatitis epidemic at Hilltop last year." Hilltop, of course, is a migrant labor camp.

Space



At the Michigan Coalition hearing a state public health official, Marvin Johannson, was explaining the state's minimum space standards for farmworker housing, when a panelist interrupted him.

Panelist: You said 60 square feet per adult?

Johannson: Yes.

Panelist: And 30 per . . . ?

Johannson: Thirty square feet per child under 12 years of age.

Panelist: In other words, a family of four—two kids and a mom and dad—could live in an area 12 by 15?

Johannson: Well, if that's what it is, yes.

It was a lesson in arithmetic, the cruel arithmetic of a state law that legitimized rabbit-hutch architecture for migrant families.

Ironically, in my travels through Michigan I found that even those niggardly standards were frequently violated by farmers unwilling to provide a child with 30 square feet of breathing space. So tiny, in fact, were many of the tarpaper shacks I saw along the highway that at first I had trouble deciding whether they contained people or livestock. Only upon closer inspection did I discover the major difference between farmworker houses and pigstys: the pigstys were bigger.

In fairness, not all the farmworker housing in Michigan was built along bestial lines. The two-room cabins at GEE Camp, for instance, were relatively roomy, and each cabin was equipped with a private shower and toilet. And the nearby Zeitz camp housed families in clean, three-room units that included sleekly modern kitchens, with built-in cabinets and tiled floors.

Such civilized touches were rare—not only in Michigan but wherever migrants resided—yet I found some in every state I visited. As exceptions, they were welcome but unexplained: no one could tell me why there always seemed to be a few growers more humane than their neighbors, growers ready to go beyond both the conventions of their business and the demands of the labor market. We may canonize those compassionate capitalists, but we have not yet learned how to clone them.

Much of the migrant housing I saw last summer reflected business as usual. The units were incredibly small and unspeakably squalid. Many of the rooms were without windows. Some were without floors—just dirt or saw-

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dust. Most had leaks in the ceilings and holes in the walls (affording tenants a view of the identical unit next-door).

The atmosphere that pervaded these dark cells was best summed up for me not by a farmworker but by the daughter of a Colorado beet farmer who sheltered his workers in something he called "the beet house." "It's an eight-by-twelve room with an extremely low ceiling," the woman told me. "The whole family lives in that one room. It's really a hell hole."

All things considered, the variety of hell holes devised, and of humiliations inflicted, was truly impressive. When it came to providing inadequate shelter for migrants, the growers displayed remarkable ingenuity.

A grower in Homestead, Florida, for example, thinking it necessary to cram two families into a single room, worried about how that might look to passers-by. He solved his "image" problem by installing two, side-by-side doors, both opening on the same small room.

At a camp near Montrose, Colorado, some of the cherry-pickers were housed for a time in packing bins, a device that had to be discarded when the "houses" were needed to store cherries.

And in Maryland—for reasons known only to the John Wright Canning Company—150 company workers were assigned to quarters in a tenement of tin that had been thoughtfully built near the cannery. The day-time temperature in those small, tinny rooms had been known to exceed 120 degrees. And when it rained on the tin roof, according to one resident, "it sounds like a big kettle drum. You can't hear nothing else."

I learned, too, how perfectly understandable and ordinary had been my Michigan confusion between houses and pigstys. Everywhere, in fact, farmworker families were being routinely stuffed into coops and sheds that only a few days before had been tenanted by pigs, cows and sheep.

At the Texas Coalition hearing, S.T. Rendon, a farmworker advocate, told of a camp he had visited in Spring Lake just before the migrants were scheduled to arrive. "They were in the process of repairing the units," he said, "because the people were fixing to come in. They had a loader out there, cleaning the units out . . . Two of the units had pigs in them."

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Epilogue

It seems clear from all of the above that throughout much of our land a farmworker housing crisis rages unchecked, unlamented and—because of the blinders most of us wear—largely unacknowledged.

Not since early Depression days, when the Okies in their sputtering jalopies swarmed into California, have so many migrants been so callously "welcomed" and so carelessly sheltered.

What Steinbeck said of the Okies in *Grapes of Wrath* remains equally true of their luckless successors: "They had hoped to find a home, and they found only hatred." The hatred is an amalgam of racism, shame, fear and old-fashioned Know-Nothingism. Never far from the surface of American agricultural life, it invariably brings out the worst in everyone, smothering compassion

A small incident that occurred in Florida last summer typified for me the subtle habits of hatred and its conscience-numbing ways. My companion that day was a farmworker specialist with the U.S. Employment Service, who had lived in the area most of his life. He took me to a camp that he'd described in advance as "really pretty good—the owners are friends of mine."

In fact, the camp turned out to be really pretty vile, even by Florida's carefree standards. For one thing, the floors in both public bathrooms were slick with raw sewage; for another, it appeared likely that no one had collected the trash in several weeks. The grounds were piled high with garbage and the air was thick with flies.

My guide seemed shocked. "Animals!" he exclaimed, kicking an orange peel. "They're just animals!"

"Who?" I asked. "The owners?"

"No," he said, surprised. "I mean the *tenants*."

If the rule in such communities is to blame victims and absolve victimizers, then the corollary is to suspect anyone who suggests there may be another way of viewing matters. The suspicion that hangs heavy over Main Street acts as a shield against reform, for it fends off precisely those elements in town that are attempting to promote migrant-centered institutions—the clinics, schools, legal services and housing programs that dot rural landscapes but hardly dent rural society.

"We're not at all trusted by the 'respectable people' in town," I was told by a migrant council coordinator in Michigan. "They accuse us of being a charity at the taxpayers' expense. Their favorite question is, 'What are you giving away today?'"

The more headway local crusaders make in their pro-migrant efforts, the more mistrust they seem to inspire. The organizer of a housing project in Federalsburg, Maryland, for example—a town the organizer lived near and her parents lived *in*—was refused service at a local restaurant because, the proprietor said, her project was "controversial." Indeed it was. For by helping farmworkers find decent housing she was conferring upon them a freedom they had never before enjoyed—the freedom to change jobs without fear of eviction.

In examining the social climate that pervades these small communities I do not intend to paint a picture of unremitting malice. Rural villages are not Sodoms; it is possible to find within their borders at least "ten who are righteous." Yet even the righteous seem frequently, and conveniently, blind to the barbarisms that are practiced every day by growers and landlords in their midst. For nearly all the elements that govern public opinion and policy are calculated to harden hearts and to veil individual responsibilities.

To villagers the migrants have about them a distinctly alien air; keeping one's distance from them can seem a natural kind of behavior, even a cultural imperative. Besides, in most instances the residents owe their livelihoods, and therefore their allegiance, to the very agricultural system that exploits their migrant neighbors. So the citizens close their eyes to the suffering and identify with the grower—a valuable friend, a hard worker, a protector of the local economy.

As in other times and other places, what we are dealing with here is not villainy but banality, the banality of evil.

If history is any judge, then the ambience thus created—in which good men and women are rewarded for the harm they do—seems more a consequence of design than of accident. For as we noted in Section I, it has always been in the interests of commercial agriculture to recruit its workers from the poorest and most despised minorities, the groups least likely to drive a hard bargain or to inspire a soft feeling of empathy among local citizens. We also saw the extent to which shelter has become a regulating force in the uneven bargains struck between growers and migrants.

From the growers' standpoint, migrant housing is most practically viewed as a farmworker warehouse, a human storage bin from which workers can be withdrawn each day for assigned tasks and to which they can be returned each night for safekeeping.

The prevailing mental amputation of migrant workers—the tendency by all to see them as so many "hands," arms and bodies—has sealed the migrants' fate. Few communities have mustered the political resources necessary to overcome their social and ideological handicaps. Most, it appears, suffer from acute paralysis of ethical will, an inability to enlist their political institutions in the cause of decency.

In our search for solutions to the farmworker housing crisis, the lessons of our history must be taken into strict account. What they teach us, alas, are the limits of localism.

In the 1930s we responded to the farmworker housing emergency in a *national* manner, through the Farm Security Administration and its inventive network of migratory labor camps. By placing responsibility for those camps, and for the welfare of their residents, in federal hands, we were expressing our belief in the primacy of national, public interests over local, private ones.

Since 1946, however, we have been off on a local tangent, and the few migrant housing dollars that have trickled forth from Washington have arrived in rural America essentially free of federal strings. In consequence, growers everywhere have been able to use public funds in pursuit of their private ends, one of which has been to keep a tight rein on their workers.

Anyone who doubts the limits of localism need only examine the 35 year record of federal housing subsidies, broadcast in the name of migrant welfare but applied in promotion of grower profits.

The price that farmworkers have paid for this policy, in tears and in terror, was amply demonstrated at the Texas Coalition hearing, where a lawyer from West Texas, William H. Beardall, described a benighted housing project known as Dimmitt Labor Camp, located near Lubbock. Its story, said Beardall, "illustrates how a federally financed Public Housing facility, if put in the wrong hands , . . . can become a tool for the oppression of farmworkers." What follow are selected excerpts from Beardall's testimony.

Dimmitt Labor Camp consists of 15 concrete block buildings laid out in barrack style with a total of 200 dwelling units. The entire facility is surrounded by an eight-foot high cyclone fence topped with barbed wire. The typical dwelling unit consists of one 14 x 12-foot room-concrete floors, concrete walls, concrete ceilings—one 9 x 12-foot kitchen area and a 3 x 5-foot bathroom....

Originally constructed in 1968, with Farmers Home Administration financing, the camp is owned and operated by the Castro County Housing Authority, a public agency created for the sole purpose of operating the labor camp.

. . . During the summer agricultural season, the population of the camp swells to well over 2,000 persons. A simple calculation reveals that this is an average of over ten persons per unit, even though units of such a small size are restricted by federal law to no more than four occupants.

But chronic overcrowding is only the beginning of the problems plaguing the Dimmitt Labor Camp. For instance, maintenance and repair are infrequent to nonexistent. On November 15, 1979, an inspector from the Texas Department of Health conducted a full-scale inspection of the labor camp . . . . Among the violations . . . he documented were holes in the walls of dwelling units, missing cement blocks, refrigerators in vacant apartments which contained rotten meat and other food, faulty door construction which let cold air and rain water into the units, inadequate heating, uncovered electrical outlets and light switches, clogged toilets, leaking showers, inadequate control of roaches and rats . . . .

In the 80 units he inspected, this health inspector found 62 broken windows and 153 torn or completely missing screens . . . . He found the grounds around the camp—which are the only playgrounds for the children—strewn with garbage, debris and broken glass.

That inspector was so shocked by the conditions he found that for the next two months he conducted weekly inspections.... By January 24th he had seen so little improvement in conditions . . . that he recommended closing down the entire facility if they had not resolved the problems within three weeks.

Until Beardall and his Rural Legal Aid office entered the picture, the County Housing Authority was running Dimmitt exclusively for the convenience of local growers and vegetable packing companies, each of whom had been assigned its own block of buildings within the camp, with total control over the units therein.

The result, as Beardall noted, "was that in order to live in this Public Housing, a worker had to agree to work for a particular grower; he had to agree to work at the wages that grower was paying—even though these were routinely below the minimum wage—and if the worker complained . . . or was injured on the job, or took a better paying job . . . , he and his family could be summarily evicted on 24 hours' notice."

In at least one case, said Beardall, a family did refuse to work for the grower who controlled their unit, with predictable consequences:

The very next day, they came home from work to find that their unit had been hosed down with all of their belongings still in it. They were thus not only forced to leave, but all their

belongings were ruined in the process.

Another family... was told that the grower required a minimum of five working adults per unit. Having no other choice, this family got together with two other families so that they would have the required minimum number of adults . . . . They ended up with a total of 21 people in a unit designed for four.

I spent a day and a night at Dimmitt and can attest to the accuracy of Beardall's gloomy report. If anything, conditions had grown worse. Certainly the rats and roaches had gotten bolder: now they were daring to be seen, strutting around the apartments like first-class tenants.

The day before I arrived the "resident manager" had moved out of the camp, announcing as she went that she no longer wished "to live among pigs."

"The little pigs are feeding the big pig," replied a tenant. It was a fair summation of Dimmitt's reigning ecology, a system in which the workers nourished the growers and the weak carried the strong.

In ways that are hard to understand and harder still to accept, all of us live in Dimmitt. All of us partake of its tormented ecology. For as the Michigan Civil Rights Commission has pointed out, "We enjoy low food prices at the expense of farmworkers and their families, yet the conditions they face, the sheds, barns and coops they live in, . . . have concerned relatively few people."

Recently I met an unusual migrant farmworker named Joe Garcia, a young man who last autumn entered the University of Michigan. His presence there, he told me, astonished his fellow students: "My family and me, we'd been working in the tomato fields all summer. We lived in a farmer's barn. Then in September I went straight from the barn to the dorm. That was really something, because my dormitory mates didn't believe I was for real. They kept staring at my hands. You see, I still had tomato stains on my hands."

On our own hands, of course, the stains are invisible.

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About the Author

Richard J. Margolis is a journalist who has written extensively on rural affairs for a wide range of newspapers, journals, foundations and government agencies. He is the author of numerous case studies, reports and pamphlets, as well as a series of books for younger and older children. He was a founding member of Rural America and served as its first Chairman. He currently lives in rural Connecticut.